

AN INDIAN DANCER WHO REVIVED AN OLD DANCE FORM / KEKA MAJUMDAR CHAKRABORTY

It was a Sunday evening . Kalamandalam Geethanandan was performing Bheema [Thullal] at a temple in Thrissur, central Kerala. The artist knelt down and bowed low for few minutes . It was really a brilliant improvisation . Spectators thought. But the accompanists suspected something. One of them said , ‘ Nobody suspected anything until he crashed face down on the stage. That was when we stopped playing and rushed to him.

The 58-year-old artist suffered a massive cardiac arrest and was rushed to hospital where he was declared dead.

Geethanandan was not only a good performer, he revived the 18th century dance form and cultivated it sincerely with modification . This dance form is called Ottanthullal which is Kerala’s 64 art form.

Kunchan Nampyre [1705-1770] founded this audio-visual dance form bending classical and folk tradition. Kunchan assimilated the characteristics of Kutiyam and Kathakali. He composed the poems, invented dance style. A collection of his poems is published by Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 1970. If we go through these poems we will find that Kunchan was a great storyteller who could enchant his audience. The source of the theme of his poetry is mythology--- Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata, Brahmanda Purana , Kathasaritsagar, Panchatantra etc. But he was never a blind translator. He made necessary changes according to his plan and idea by giving the milieu of local colour and contemporary life. His creation was really new wine in an old bottle. Satire and social criticism are the hallmarks of this unique dance form.

Thullal is a solo performance combining dance and song. To accompany the dancer there are one or two singers with instruments like Mridangam and cymbals who repeats the verses.

There are three types of Thullal---

1] Ottan Thullal--- On the dancer’s head there will be a ‘Kondaketta’ as in Kathakali, over which there is a crown that bears a decorative border in the shape of a serpent-hood and a long ‘Karanappalake’ as an ornament covering for the ears. After appearing on the stage the performer will wear the crown. Green powder is applied on the face of the performer and decoration is made on the other parts of the face.

2] Sitankan Thullal--- On the head of the performer there is only a ‘Konta’, covered with white kerchief and decorated with a lotus design made of tender palmleaves. Eyes and eyebrows , not face, are painted. Body is decorated with palmleaves. The waist is covered by Kacha, Saramuntu and Munthi.

3] Parayan Thullal—On the head there is a single-hood crown. The artist has a Pacha on his face, eyes and eyebrows are black, body covered with white ash and sandal paste.

Kalamandalam Geethanandan, who passed away recently, breathed a new life into the dance form that the 18th century Malayalam poet- performer Kunchan Nampyre had created. He created the form Thullal Padha Kacheri using a blend of different Carnatic ragas as in music concert to make Thullal more attractive to the people.

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